

Back Cast

By Ron Wilson

We're somewhere in Mountrail County, my first sharp-tailed grouse hunt in North Dakota nearly 20 years ago, and I'm trying to act like I know what I'm doing. My hunting partners are all veterans of this game of hide and seek with a bird I've seen dancing through a peek hole in a blind, but on which I have yet to swing my shotgun.

We fall into a rhythm behind bird dogs hunting roundabout through cover that swallows them at times. I walk the outer edge of our small band, not so much to stay out of the way, but to command the best view of what's going on and maybe learn something.

It's early on and I'm standing on a rise, counting hunter heads and bird dog tails for safety's sake, when a whitetail buck slips from its bed, heading back the way we came. The buck is striking. Its high-riding antlers are nearly white, sun-bleached like bones of an old animal that simply tipped over at the thought of another approaching North Dakota winter.

The whitetail gets up only feet behind one of our hunters and I'm instantly envious of his immediacy to such an impressive animal. He could seemingly reach out and touch the buck with the barrel of his shotgun if he had a mind to. I watch the deer leave, not stopping once to check his back trail.

As we water the dogs at the end of the hunt, and admire the few birds scratched from a buffaloberry patch no bigger than a Volkswagen, I ask about the buck. I'm expecting some comment on its ghost-white rack, or how its unexpected departure put a skip in the hunter's step. Instead, I get nothing. To the hunters walking below my vantage point, the deer is an apparition, simply a gust of wind parting brush in its path.

I've since seen many whitetails dance undetected around hunters and the performance never gets old. It's not like I'm rooting for the deer, especially when I'm carrying a license or two in my fanny pack, but you can't help but smile when a deer slips from a hunter who seemingly has a lot on his side, a bigger brain included.

A few seasons ago, with my doe license already filled, I watched from a hilltop with binoculars as my hunting partner waded

into a dried-up slough that holds deer year after year. It's big cover, but not unmanageable if you zigzag, backtrack and then do it all again. One person can spend the better part of an hour in there, eating cattail fluff and cussing the sometimes hard going, but it's typically worth the effort.

The deer were in there, a handful of them, as I watched their dark heads surface, then disappear like bubbles in boiling water. With so many deer, I figured one would lose its nerve, break from cover and the others would follow. Instead, it was like watching a well-choreographed dance where the deer knew the moves and the hunter did not.

When my partner finally excited the cattail jungle, he shook his sweat-stained ball cap in bewilderment. I knew what he was thinking: Where in the heck are the deer? The answer: They were pretty much all around you.

If hunting were easy, no matter the species, it wouldn't be any fun. If the challenge of finding game and outwitting it on occasion is lost, then why do it? I know this is an often-uttered declaration, but I buy into it. Plus, it offers some solace – but makes for very thin soup – when you drag home with an empty game bag and heavy legs.

In the area we deer hunt, we run across the random animal that monopolizes talk around the camp woodstove. There was one such buck we spotted in early September and tried to keep track of as days crept into November. He'd shown himself often enough



early on to cast an idea to his whereabouts, but sightings became more infrequent as the season neared.

For three days we lived in what we considered the buck's digs, searching, watching and waiting for a glimpse, reassurance that he hadn't followed a hot doe into the next township with no reason to return.

Getting a crack at the buck, I suspected at the time, was silly. We didn't have the time necessary to hunt a single animal, nor did it make a lot of sense when venison sausage and pepperoni sticks are the preferred result of hanging out on the prairie in November without obligations. Still ...

The short of it is this: We finally spot him through binoculars the last evening in an area we'd walked, watched and waited over for three days. As he steps into what remains of the day's sunshine painting the hillside, it becomes clear why we never met. The buck has been camped on a bump in a slough not big enough to hold a pup tent. He's wet and muddied from his wade from security to dry land; and surely reeking of a blend of rut and slough goo.

Of course, we never find out for sure.

